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Author(s)	Wing Tek Lum
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## CULTURE

# Ah Ying: True Story And Moving Film

By WING TEK LUM

Cheung Chung Pak, the acting teacher and would-be filmmaker, at an early point in *Ah Ying* explains that he wants to make a film in Hong Kong that "reflects our time." "If not," he says, "no one will know we ever existed." The time and the people which he refers to are not the kung fu heroes or the soap-opera lovers we have been accustomed to from Hong Kong movies (and whom even the students in the acting class consider to be the proper subjects for film as suggested by the two individual skits performed in their initial class). Instead we are presented with a social setting depicting in rich detail the realities, and not the fantasies, of the great majority of Hong Kong's people.

The movie is actually entitled *Bun Bin Yahn* in Cantonese and perhaps can be roughly translated as "An Unfulfilled Woman." It records one young person's metamorphosis from a caterpillar to a butterfly (similar in some ways to the plot of *Flashdance*), though this movie's ending is only tentative about whether Ah Ying will turn out to be something more than a drab moth. What we are shown through vignettes cutting back and forth from Ah Ying's various worlds are glimpses inside the cocoon, a hothouse environment which could lead as easily to suffocation as to maturation.

### THIRD SISTER

Hui So Ying, or Ah Ying, is the Third Sister in a family unit of ten, consisting of the parents, a son and his wife, five daughters and another son. Their standard of living would probably be considered lower class by Westerners, though nothing out of the ordinary by most who live in Hong Kong. The family's income, as is often the case, comes from a variety of sources. The elder brother drives a taxi, and one of the sisters apparently works in an electronics factory. Although left unsaid, other siblings may also have jobs, though others still may be in secondary school. The parents appear somewhat fortunate, in their own small way, running their own fish stall—though we suspect that the business is not what it might be, for the father is a slow worker given to naps and drink. Only Ah Ying of all of the children helps at the stall, and for her work she is given HK\$500 in spending money each month.

We would presume that the Hui children are generally not well educated, like Ah Ying who at one point confesses to having failed the critical English section of her secondary school leaving exam. Education is seen like the HK\$2000 worth of history books locked up in the Huis' cabinet—merely something nice to look at once in a

while. Given that the Hong Kong school system is compulsory only up to the equivalent of our ninth-grade level, it is no wonder that under family pressures the children choose to find jobs as early as possible in order to augment the family income. But without the scholastic credentials, Ah Ying and her siblings face the same fish-after-fish careers as that of their parents.

The Huis occupy a pair of adjoining flats in what appears to be one of Hong Kong's many public housing projects (that they have obtained side-by-side units seems in fact quite lucky). One of the small flats serves as a living/dining room for the entire family, with the elder brother and his wife occupying the bedroom; the second flat accommodates the other eight, with the parents in the bedroom and the other six children sleeping on three bunk beds in the main room. What Ah Ying can therefore claim as her own space, in the Western individualistic sense, is merely a cube of air delineated by her lower bunk (although in one scene another sister is shown sleeping on it). It is here that Ah Ying hangs her treasured birthday cards from her boyfriend, and it is here that she invites Cheung to sit when he visits. But these are small luxuries. When Cheung betrays his Western mores by suggesting that she live out on her own, Ah Ying immediately dismisses it as naive; it is a sober recognition that these two flats are where she will stay for years to come.

### SARDINES

Privacy perforce takes the form of stereo headphones in such a home life; if not that, then one must get used to others listening in on one's telephone conversations. And in order to escape from the crowded family environment ("sardines" as Ah Ying describes it), the Hui children seek outside activities—the "studying, picnicking, camping, swimming" that their father complains about. Camping trips such as the one Ah Ying reminisces about may be a bit uncommon, but it does show to what lengths young people will go to have a few intimate moments by themselves. (Ah Ying and her boyfriend, Ah Hung, also enjoy the luxury of Ah Hung's private rooms in his family's flat where they can have sex). Evening schools, like the acting class and the French and fencing clubs mentioned by one of the sisters, are often attended more for diversion and social opportunities and not necessarily for the subjects being taught. It is inevitable that the father counting noses in his Chiu Chow dialect one night would find one of his children still not returned home.

For the Hui children marriage would seem to provide the only

way out of their sardine surroundings. Ah Ying's parents, seeing a prize catch from America for one of their older daughters, are understandably full of praise for the "indispensable" Ah Ying when Cheung comes to visit. Yet we do wonder whether in fact the other daughter who gets pregnant and is no longer living at home by the end of the movie is really living a life much different from before, say, with her husband's family. Had Ah Ying continued going with her boyfriend, we would expect that this would be her future too.

### MIND OF HER OWN

Ah Ying herself is shown to be considerate and responsible, direct and with a mind of her own. Besides being willing to work for her parents, she demonstrates a filial sympathy for her inebriated father, helping him off the floor. She is also able to anticipate his anger, hiding the kitchen knife just before he is told about her sister's pregnancy. She knows where her missing women classmates are and stands up for them. And she takes risks, as shown when she volunteers to sing in the first acting class and when as a playful salutation she walks up to hit her teacher in the bookstore. But she can be moody and withdrawn, as we see both at the beginning and end of the film, just after the breaking up of a relationship.

By washing her hands and face of the fish smell just before acting class, Ah Ying reveals her own sense of shame regarding her hawker's life, suggesting a recognition by her that there may be something more to life than her present dead-end situation. This dissatisfaction is confirmed by her explanation, given that same night in class, that she enrolled "to look for another road out." We suspect that a month or two earlier she probably considered her relationship with her boyfriend as fulfilling enough (as he observes, "I didn't expect you to be so serious"). Had she been going out with him still, she most likely would not have been so predisposed to take the fateful, spur-of-the-moment step to join the class.

Ah Ying enters the class with a fresh hope as symbolized by her new, Sylvia Chang-the-film star-like haircut. The class proves to be quite liberating, unlike the standard experiences found in the "die if told to die" Hong Kong educational system. Cheung Chung Pak's teaching style expresses his Western training—where "education," derived from the Latin *educare* (meaning "to bring out"), is in direct contrast to the Hong Kong practice of "feeding the ducks." The acting students respond with creativity, as in this same scene when, after Cheung shoots them, they go him one better and fall



Hui So-Ying as Ah Ying. The film premieres Oct. 16 at the Lumiere Theatre, 1572 California St. in SF.

down dead.

### GOLDEN RULE

Cheung's simile that "chasing art will become like chasing a girlfriend" takes an ironic turn as he and Ah Ying begin seeing each other after class. Especially for Ah Ying, the relationship transforms her both from within and without. As I have written in another context (in the *Cultural Climate*, January, 1982):

"The Golden Rule is a paradox: One must be able to know and love oneself deeply before one can have something to share with another; conversely, only via interactions with others can one begin to discover an identity for oneself."

And we see Ah Ying step by step being able both to understand herself better and to be open to and care for her teacher.

The relationship Ah Ying develops with Cheung is something different from the glittering sunrises and passionate sex which she recalls of her earlier relationship with Ah Hung. Instead, with Cheung, cars fall apart, and they get kicked out of movie houses. Songs are exchanged out loud in late-night food stalls, and together they share the hard work of rehearsals. Ah Ying leans that love can be "deeper" (to use a term her former boyfriend gives continued lip service to). And this realization makes her problems at home and at the fish

stall seem not to bother as much.

The critical turning point of the film takes place on a pier at night, just after Cheung is told he cannot make his movie, and just before he announces the start of the play for the acting class. Ah Ying confides in Cheung a desperate question which has been bottled up in her, which probably she has only recently articulated for herself, and which sums up all of her hopes and fears:

Ah Ying: You think life is always unfair then?

Cheung: It's never been any other way. That's how it is.

An Ying: Why do I have to sell fish?

Cheung: Maybe it's your fate.

It is the question of justice, or rather the existential question of whether there is any justice, or meaning, to caged lives.

Cheung's notion of fate is something more than just nihilism, sometimes a cynical excuse to do nothing. Working on the Asian motif of reincarnation, Cheung suggests a resolution to the discrepancy between his fortune teller's prediction of success and the reality of his failed art. "They can't tell me when I will die. So I don't know whether I can expect success in this life or the next," he observes, with a wit born of his frustrations. Given his general mave-

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## TIBET

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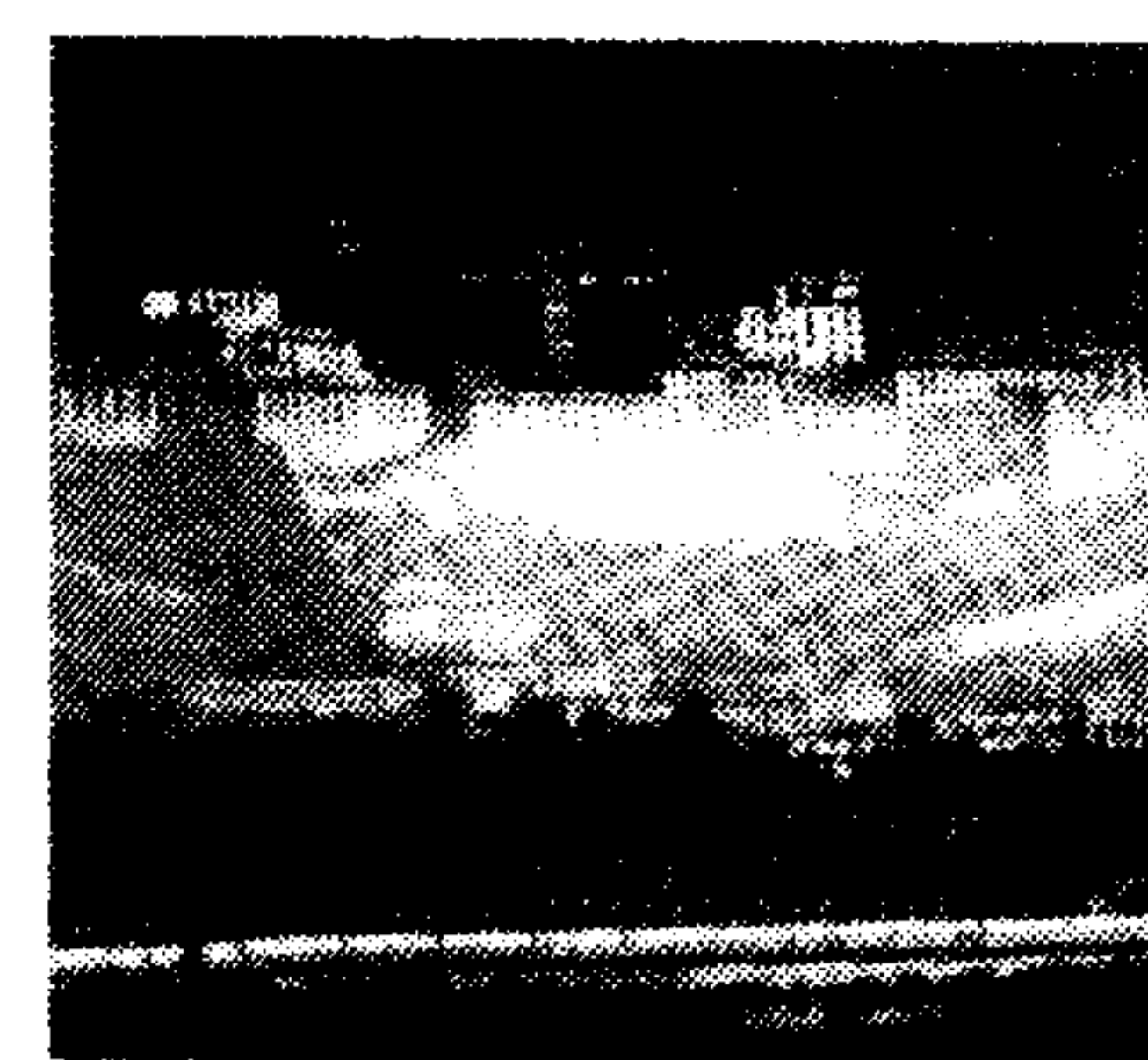
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# AH YING

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rick nature, we are not certain that Cheung really accepts literal religious dogma; but he offers at least a metaphor for a gritty, modest hope—one that he would probably say is all that can be expected, and that is anyway enough.

## FILM PROJECT

Cheung's hope without illusions demands responsibility and action. Having failed in his own film project, it means for him leaving Hong Kong, crumbling up his beat-up Volkswagen just as he has crumbled up so many sheets of paper working on successive drafts of his screenplay. But as teacher he must first transfer to his prize student his hope for a new life. Ah Ying rises to the occasion, as we see symbolically during rehearsals when on the rooftop she shouts her lines of liberation above the hustle and bustle of the city. With discipline and talent Ah Ying performs well in her role, and we respond like her father in the audience, in a scene integrating Ah Ying's many worlds, his darting eyes and shy but proud grin creating one of the most moving sights of the film.

Ah Ying's character in the play describes the new life envisioned as "somewhere new, somewhere clean, as clean as newborn babies." And the play itself becomes a watershed for both, marking especially for Ah Ying the end of her cocoon phase. What America holds for Cheung is not clear, but he goes in his own wry way, clean-shaven. In contrast, Ah Ying anticipates her metamorphosis with apprehension, as evidenced by her hand-wringing during rehearsals and

then the actual washing of her hands and face immediately after her performance. She will have to face the future on her own, she knows. Even with new wings of understanding about herself and her world, her life as a butterfly may not be worth it without Cheung.

## HARSH REALITIES

At the audition, wearing the basketball T-shirt Cheung passed on to her, Ah Ying admits not only to selling fish; she says further, "I feel much better about it since I've taken acting classes." She returns to the harsh, "unclean" realities of her family situation but now with something to live for, in her "next life": if not Cheung, her new-found art. That is her "full understanding" about Cheung's intentions, that their love, brief though it was, will be enough to sustain her. This realization however is a very painful one, and she recreates the climactic scene at the audition in protest to his leaving—calling out not to the general in the script but to "Old Cheung." Yet when asked to do a second skit Ah Ying calmly accepts Cheung's final lesson, and ends by blowing perfectly round, yet all too soon disappearing, smoke rings into the air. It is a gallant, tragic moment summing up how very alone and finite Ah Ying—and each of us—really are, and how very precious are all of our brief lives together.

## TURMOIL AND PROSPERITY

It has often been remarked that after the Communist takeover of mainland China its refugees split up: the politicians to Taiwan, the businessmen to Hong Kong. The latter society accordingly evolved a peculiar capitalist ethic in the

midst of an overseas Chinese no man's land, sprouting like an unusual flower in the cracks between the ideologies of the two Chinas. Its population and economy boomed, and the children of the refugee generation—Ah Ying and her "Hong Kong believer" contemporaries—were nurtured during this period of materialistic prosperity ("prosperity" being a relative term recognizing that 30 years ago families like the Huis might be living in the streets or in makeshift camps). The laissez-faire premises which fostered the boom also permitted the ludicrous: a film institute found next to a casket factory, and even a flyover abutting flats so close that one can make emergency telephone calls through a window. And yet by the same token it can be said that with such no-nonsense realism Hong Kong has less room for lies, such as the five-minute deletion from the mainland Chinese film which Cheung notices and decries. The cacophony, the turmoil of daily life that pervades Hong Kong is also fertile ground for opportunity and liberation. The only problem is to know what one should be liberated for.

Near the very end of the movie there is a haunting portrait of one of Ah Ying's sisters when she returns home very late at night. She is all dressed up even to her colorful shoes, and strikes us as very pretty in contrast to the mundane surroundings. Ah Ying looks at her without comment, but perhaps, we can imagine, as if looking into a mirror of dreams. This is what Ah Ying might become, but for the acting, but for Cheung Ching Pak, a nicely made up young woman with a vacant stare. Ah Ying we see knows better. And so do we. □